

Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 12:38-44; 1 Kings 17:8-16

November 10, 2024
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What Now?

Eight years ago, I preached a sermon at the Greensboro United Church of Christ, on the Sunday after Trump's first election to the presidency. I looked back on that sermon, this week, as I reeled from the shock of Trump's second successful bid, and I was struck by how much, at that time, I had focused on fear. I was hearing fear from people in the congregation, from family and friends, from online posts and newspapers, and particularly from those who had good reason to fear because of their race, ethnicity, immigration status, gender, sexual orientation, gender transformation, disability, or deep concern for the environment.

Those fears are now more justified than ever, as we confront the reality that a majority of the population voted for Trump and all that he represents. But something feels different this time. What I'm hearing, time and again, in conversations, texts and emails from friends and family, and in letters from justice oriented organizations, is a new resolve, a stiffening of the spine, a commitment to keep working, and working hard, for the rights and freedoms we believe should belong to everyone. Here's a sampling of what I've been reading from some of those who will be most affected by a second Trump presidency.

From Black Lives Matter: *Disappointment is something we know all too well. It's been a part of our story for generations, through struggle, betrayal, and hardship. But it's never been the whole story. Not even close. Every day, we rise. That's the true miracle. We take the setbacks and rebuild something beautiful out of love. We carry the heartache and somehow find new strength.*

From an environmental legal cooperative formed by Indigenous Americans: *The next four years will take resilience, courage, and creativity, to confront all that comes. We've been through seemingly insurmountable challenges before and like nature, that always charts a way forward, we'll find a way through together.*

And this from a non-profit that works for cultural diversity and economic justice: *Amid this result, let's build. Let's continue to build collective movements to ensure equity remains at the forefront. Let's embody our values of justice, progress, and impact to create the world we desperately need.*

On Tuesday, I experienced an odd sense of calm, an awareness that the huge anxiety generated by this election, would soon be resolved, in one way or another. Wednesday, I woke to the reality that it *had been* resolved, and in the way I most feared. And yet there is something different in me, a new feeling echoed by so many in what I've been hearing and reading: I am done with being afraid.

Like many of my generation, when I was in college I inhaled the science-fiction novel, *Dune*, by Frank Herbert. What I remember most from the book—the thing that has stuck with me all these

years— is the litany of a persecuted group, called the Bene Gesserit, that begins,
"I must not fear.
Fear is the mind-killer.
Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration.
I will face my fear.

In particular, it is the words “Fear is the mind-killer,” that have stayed with me. Fear makes us contract, pulling ourselves inward in self-defense. It shrinks the circle of those we want to relate to and, even more, the circle of those we trust. It is the primary tool of authoritarian regimes, who know that by encouraging fear of the “other” and defining them as a threat to “us,” they can build support for the “necessity” of oppression. Fear robs us of our agency, our generosity, and our joy. In some ways, my *greatest* fear is that I will let fear shrink me, silence me, and harden me to the needs of others. I’m sure you’ve all heard the apt words, spoken by Franklin D. Roosevelt, in his first inaugural address, “. . . the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

But how do we let go of fear, particularly when it seems like an entirely reasonable response? In both our scripture readings, this morning, poor widows act in a ways that counter fear. Even though they have come to the end of their resources, and fear for their own survival, each gives, as Jesus notes in our gospel story, “out of her poverty,” offering all that she has. In particular, the widow who puts her two small coins into the Temple treasury, does not let fear rob her of her agency, her generosity, or her joy in being able to give. And we get the sense that she is able to do this because her trust is firmly placed in God.

In a conversation with the Youth Group, last Sunday, we talked about the difference between *orthodoxy*— believing the right things, and *orthopraxy*— doing the right things. For much of its history, Christianity has tended to focus on orthodoxy. But at The Old Meeting House, I think that orthopraxy is much more important to us than orthodoxy. We are well aware that our beliefs about God cover a range from the traditional to the progressive, and may well include, “I just don’t know.” However, we seem to be pretty much in agreement about what we are called to be and do as people, and as a community, of faith, whatever it is God means to us. A poem by the Black theologian, Howard Thurman, sums up the commitment I see in this congregation.

Thurman calls his poem,
The Work of Christmas:
When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,

*To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.*

Along with this right practice toward our neighbor, the commandment, “*You shall love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.*” . . . and “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself,*” asks us to consider right practice toward God and toward ourselves. For me, right practice toward God involves anything that brings us closer to God and makes us more receptive to, and aware of, God’s presence in our lives. This might be prayer, meditation, walks in the woods, reading an inspirational book, serving others, offering praise, practicing intentional gratitude— whatever it is that you do to remind yourself that you are God’s beloved and to return your love to God.

Right practice toward ourselves includes all of these practices toward God, because they transform us in very real ways. It also involves the kind of self care Hannah spoke of last week— remembering to look for the beauty, to find the blessing, to enjoy this precious life we have been given, and to be still and know that God is God. It also helps to practice the kind of mindfulness that pays attention to our thoughts and catches us when we dive down the rabbit hole of anger or fear.

Many years ago, in a very tough time in my life, I developed a practice that helped me, and continues to help me, when something sends me into a downward spin. Picture a decision tree of the kind that begins with a question in a box with arrows to a yes or no response. The question in the box refers to whatever it is that has angered or frightened me, and asks, “Is this something you can do anything about?” As Hannah noted last week, there are many things that impact our lives over which we have no control. This is frightening, but sometimes we need to recognize the truth of it. So the “no” arrow from my question— no, this isn’t something I can do anything about— leads to a little box that says, “Let it go.”

The “yes” arrow leads to a box that says, “What *can* you do about it?” This generates sideways arrows to boxes where I brainstorm ideas about what I might do. For example, I could write to the newspaper or my legislators, I could donate to organizations that promote justice or work to relieve poverty and suffering, I could volunteer with one of these organizations. Once I’ve recognized that I have the power to do something I ask the difficult but important question, “In all honesty, am I actually going to *do* any of these things?” If the answer is “no,” the arrow points to a little box that says . . . “Let it go.” If the answer is yes, the arrow points to a box that says, “Do it!” In this way, I look for those areas where I *do* have control and where I *can* do something about things that upset and frighten me, and I consciously let go of fretting over those areas where I have no control.

I am so done with being afraid. If you are too, can we replace fear with concern? “Afraid” is almost always followed by the word “of.” We are afraid *of* something, and our tendency is to turn, or even run, away. Concern is usually followed by the word “for.” We have concern *for* someone or something, and our concern moves us toward rather than away.

And so, pray with me for the gift of concern for the targeted communities, the environment policies, the rights and freedoms, that are most at risk, and pray that concern will turn us toward determination to stand fast and do the work that needs to be done. Like the widows who trusted enough to give all they had to give, may we trust that God is with us when we do the right, but risky, thing, because we hold to the assurance, in the words of Julian of Norwich, that *there is a force of love moving through the universe that holds us fast and will never let us go.*

Amen.